

## **Christ Church, Georgetown**

Sermon, Sunday, April 2, 2017

Lent 5: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:17-45

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When I was young, and played considerably more sport than I do now, I used to play Rugby. For the uninitiated, Rugby is a bit like American football, only far less organized! It is compared to soccer in the following saying: "Soccer is a game for gentleman played by hooligans, but Rugby is a game for hooligans played by gentlemen!"

I remember one of the boys on the Rugby team was a very serious and quiet chap, and I think I could see why he was that way. His father always came to watch him play and would stand passionately shouting instructions from the sidelines. I felt sorry for the lad because, after every game, if he didn't play well, his father would give him a real dressing down in front of us all. I remember him standing, despondent and looking down at the ground, while his dad lectured him on his shortcomings as a player. For those who know Harry Potter, it was very much a "Dobbie needs to go and iron his hands" moment! Mind you, for all I know, my former teammate is now a millionaire, or the ruler of a small country thanks to this treatment! I somehow doubt it, though.

Of course all of us, if we watch our children play sport or perform in public in any way, do completely identify with them. Hopefully, we don't behave like my friend's dad, but our hearts inevitably sink at their every mistake and soar at their every success. Whatever happens to them as we watch, we feel it at least as strongly as they do, probably more strongly. It is as if we were up there instead of them, only worse because we have no control over what happens.

Lorraine and I were fortunate enough to be invited to a musical evening last week. The performer was a professional concert pianist of outstanding ability, but what really made the evening special was that it took place in someone's house. I was sitting there and thinking how lucky we were to be invited to something like that and, at the same time, "Gosh, how my dear parents would have loved this if they were still alive!"

My father, particularly, loved music, and I remember as a very small boy sitting in front of his study fire as he played me Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, explaining each of the movements in turn. He brought it to life for me so that I could almost see the folk dancing and the storm gathering and breaking over the countryside. Music was a big part of my father's spirituality. I remember how, for him, the Champagne Chorus from the little operetta, "Die Fledermaus," by Johann Strauss II was what he thought heaven would be like. In it everyone in the cast lifts their glasses and sings of friendship and gladness and good company. "That is what heaven will be like," he said. "We will recognize it because we have known glimpses of it here already."

Music is, a key element in worship, and has been from the very earliest times. The reasons for that are many and profound, no doubt. One aspect is that, more than any other human artifice, music makes porous the boundary between the physical and the spiritual. It is physical, of course. When all is said and done music is just vibrations in the air. And yet it reaches inside us and speaks to our souls of something far beyond the prosaic of the material here and now.

In today's Gospel Jesus says one of the most important "I am" sayings in St. John's account.

“I am the resurrection and the life, whosoever believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”

Elizabeth Keeler spoke about these “I am” sayings in her sermon last week. “I am the bread of life, ...the light of the world, ...the way the truth and the life.” In them Jesus reveals more and more about who he is. But what can he really mean by them? What can he mean this morning by saying that he is an event - “the resurrection,” and an existence - “the life?” And what does he mean by bringing the dead Lazarus back to life again?

In the amazing Old Testament reading this morning, we see Ezekiel using death as an analogy for something else. The valley and the dry bones represents the spiritual state of the people of Israel: Invaded, defeated, driven into exile, idolatrous, and despairing. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

This incredible image of those bones drawing together, and bodies reassembling, and life and breath finally being breathed back into them is so powerful, isn't it? These are not the zombies of the strangely twisted modern imagination. These are whole and living people: the whole house of Israel in fact. God is saying, “No matter how utterly desolate and spiritually dead my people may seem to be, I can bring them back to life again. I can restore the fortunes of my people, Israel, from the ruins of exile, sin, idolatry, and defeat.”

As we now draw closer to Holy Week, we come to the time of the year when we bring our lives and lay them alongside Jesus's life in those last critical days. We walk with him through the crowds shouting “Hosanna!” We sit with him at the last supper where the betrayer eats and then leaves to do his worst. We then go out into Gethsemane and wait the terrible hours of the darkest night with him. We warm our hands at the fire in the enemies' camp and hear the cock crow after we have denied even knowing him. We stand at the foot of the cross and listen to his words to the good thief and his words of forgiveness to his executioners. We hear his cry of forsakenness and his last -- “It is finished” -- or perhaps, “It is accomplished.” In short, as Dr. James Farwell was saying in last Sunday's Adult Forum, we identify with him.

We can do this because, in our own lives and experience, we have come to recognize something of those events. On our way through life, we have known what it is to be betrayed and to betray. We have known the long aching hours of decision as we consider the wise choice, and the brave choice, and the selfish choice. We have made our petty denials in order to hide ourselves from scrutiny, and we have known what it is like to simply run away. We have increasingly come to see our lives as a line of small crosses and empty tombs. Coming here to America, for me, is a small cross and an empty tomb. An old life has come to an end, and God -- much to my amazement -- seems to have made a new one out of nothing. And as the Holy Weeks and the years go by, we see the shadows lengthen around us and we know that, one day, we too, must go this way once and for all.

Every year I watch in the dark of Maundy Thursday in a chapel decked out like the Garden of Gethsemane, just like the one we will have here. Each year I try to stay awake but often fail as is, after all, traditional for disciples. And over the years I have become increasingly aware that, one day, I will wait in that garden for the last time, and -- once the darkness has passed -- I hope to exchange it for that other garden that none of us has ever seen, but -- I suspect -- that we will not find unfamiliar. And if there is singing, and champagne, and the joy of friendships renewed, I will not be so very much surprised.

This is how Jesus can be the bread of life, the light of the world, and indeed the resurrection and the life. Because, as we walk with him, his life enters into us and we come to see the meaning of our lives in the detail of his. Like the music that is just vibrating molecules of air but yet somehow enters into us and becomes our deepest aches and our highest joys, Christ -- in his life and in his body and blood -- opens in us the way to the reality of God and the truth about ourselves. If music makes the boundary between this material world and the world of the spirit porous, then Christ tears away the curtain of the night and opens a permanent gateway. Lazarus stands, still partly bound by the bandages of death, to show us that the way is now open.

No one who saw Lazarus and what was done there that day could ever think about death in quite the same way again. They heard the first strains of a new music there. Come the first Easter Day, that glorious music sounded out from the empty tomb to fill the whole world with a new song.

So as we prepare for Holy Week, today's Gospel encourages us to identify with Christ. In this identification, we are the children on the stage or the Rugby pitch whose Father's heart leaps at our joys and grieves when we fall. As we walk with him we see that it is Christ who has identified with us; his life that intersects with ours; his voice that takes the song of our hearts and makes of it a new melody: The melody of his Kingdom that is not just new life but "the life." the life that his Father always intended, and that every father desires for his children.